THE Theatre OF THE ABSURD

Artaud never achieved his creative vision of a radically different type of theatre. However, after his death, a new form of playwriting emerged which was profoundly influenced by his ideas. It was called the ‘theatre of the absurd’.

In fact, a number of very different dramatists and plays were associated with this title, and there were actually two waves of absurdist writing in the decades following the Second World War. The first wave appeared in the 1940s and early 1950s, while the second wave began in the late 1950s and continued through to the early 1980s. There were significant differences in writing style, in subject matter and in types of performance between the two waves, and even between plays in each wave.

Whatever the differences, these two waves of absurdist theatre share common fundamental characteristics. First of all, absurdist theatre was essentially a genre of writing created by a number of outstanding playwrights. Secondly, the plays all express similar strong and individual views of the world as a meaningless and threatening place for human beings to live in. In performance, the plays use a range of startlingly original theatrical techniques that all work to communicate to audiences the playwrights’ grim vision of life. In all the absurdist plays, the influence of early surrealism and the theatre of cruelty is clear and pervasive.

THE FIRST WAVE

Three major dramatists dominated the early development of absurdist. They were Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet. All three men were profoundly influenced by the ideas of Artaud and by the existential philosophy of Sartre. Like Sartre and Artaud, the absurdist playwrights believed that all life was meaningless and totally random. Their plays show human beings struggling to cope with their lives in a hostile world, and in many cases simply waiting to die.

One of the reasons for the absurdist’s bleak view of the world was the Second World War. The deliberate extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis, the deaths of some 60 million people in the fighting, and the use of nuclear weapons to end the war led to a widespread sense of disgust and despair which surfaced in the first wave of absurdist plays.

Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett, the greatest of all the absurdist playwrights, is also one of the most significant playwrights of the twentieth century. His plays are a despairing portrait of inadequate and often desperate human beings struggling to survive, or facing death, in a world that is bewildering and hostile. However, Beckett’s extraordinary use of language transforms his plays into moving, profound, and often even comic masterpieces. He weaves unique and powerful poetry out of an amazingly simple and spare use of words.

Eugène Ionesco

On the surface, Ionesco’s plays are much funnier and less grim than Beckett’s work, but there is a darker layer underneath. Simple objects, such as chairs, take on a bizarre and threatening life of their own, and everyday events and experiences slide into nightmare and surreal madness for Ionesco’s characters.

Jean Genet

In Genet’s plays, the characters struggle to control themselves and each other in a world that is chaotic and dangerous. Many of Genet’s characters are trapped inside their own bizarre fantasies, living out their dreams and nightmares, and unable to distinguish between reality and illusion.
THE SECOND WAVE

The plays of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet had a profound impact on the development of Western theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. Part of that impact produced a second wave of playwrights whose work was essentially absurdist in form, although quite different from the first wave, and often very different from each other. The key figures in this second wave were Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard.

Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter’s work is fascinating for its use of language, and of silence. In his plays, characters are trapped in despairing and meaningless lives, and often live them out in a single room. The entrance of a stranger is always a threat, and in his early plays often led to violence. All the characters use words not to communicate but as weapons of attack and defence, and as a means of avoiding the truth. Long pauses and absolute silence are common in Pinter’s plays as communication breaks down completely.

Edward Albee

Like Pinter, Edward Albee writes about the fear and danger of living in a hostile world, a world where people hurt rather than help each other. Albee uses comedy like a scalpel to dissect his characters and reveal the truth about them. His plays also have tragic overtones, unlike those of the other absurdist, because many of his characters have worthwhile or likeable elements; these, however, are destroyed by others or by the characters’ inability to deal with reality. Only some of Albee’s plays are absurdist in form.

Tom Stoppard

Many of Tom Stoppard’s early one act plays are hilariously funny, and his characters are often genuinely engaging and sympathetic. However, they still inhabit a world that is mystifying, threatening and often nightmarish. Like Pinter, Stoppard is deeply concerned about the importance of language and the inability of humans to use words to communicate with each other. His two outstanding, full-length absurdist plays are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers. His later plays have been much more eclectic in style.
THEATRE OF THE ABSURD TODAY

Absurdist theatre did not end with the second wave of dramatists. Rather, it became an integral part of world theatre. It is hard to identify a modern play that is exclusively absurdist, but many of the important plays of the past decade have contained strong absurdist elements, and many outstanding contemporary playwrights use absurdist ideas and techniques in their work. Sam Shepard in the USA, Caryl Churchill in England and Michael Gow in Australia are major dramatists whose work has been profoundly influenced by absurdism.

A Melbourne Theatre Company production of Harold Pinter's The Lover

Surrealism, from its original dreamlike form through Artaud's theatre of cruelty to absurdist drama, has been a major movement over the past century and has now become a fundamental element in modern theatre. As we move into the twenty-first century, we are seeing an increasing number of important new plays that weave powerful surreal elements into their basic form, and some of the most exciting theatre companies currently operating worldwide are essentially surreal in nature. If the last 100 years saw the birth and growth of surrealism, this century is likely to see its full flowering.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

Waiting for Godot

by Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett was born in Ireland, but lived most of his life in Paris. His play Waiting for Godot was first produced in 1953. Fifteen years later Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his status as a writer, proof that the theatre of the absurd was a major force in world literature.

Waiting for Godot provoked a storm of criticism when it first appeared for a number of reasons. Practically nothing happens during the entire play, it does not tell a story in the conventional sense, and it is full of pauses and silences, strange uses of language, and peculiar people.